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Reflections

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The Whig interpretation of history views the past as a relentless march of progress in the human condition.¹ Amir Lavie's interpretation of the history of Canadian Jewish Studies is Whiggish. In his view, "a group of community activists and amateur historians" was succeeded by a "generation of young, Canadian-born, emerging academics who decided, and were able, to dedicate careers to researching Canadian Jewry." The scholars who made Canadian Jewish Studies their lifelong pursuit are now retired or nearing retirement, so Amir has summoned them to "share their personal accounts about their career journeys." Doing so, they may "inspire the younger and emerging generation of scholars and researchers."² Historiographically, Amir thus sees us moving onward and upward, from ground-breaking amateurs to first-generation academic pioneers to galvanized progeny.

This schema may be a vessel capable of containing many students of Canadian Jewry, but I for one don't fit. "My" generation of academics includes mainly Montrealers and Torontonians who, after graduating from full-time Jewish schools and otherwise taking advantage of the rich cultural life of their large Jewish communities, began plowing the field of Canadian Jewish Studies in their 20s and 30s. They made important contributions from the get-go.

I hail from Saint John, New Brunswick. In, say, 1961, when I was ten years old, the city's Jews may have owned about one-tenth of the stores in the downtown core of King, Charlotte and Union Streets, but they comprised a mere one-quarter of one percent of the city's 100,000 residents: hardly enough to sustain a full-time Jewish school. True, I was kept busy with activities involving other Jewish children: Young Judaea Sunday afternoon, Hebrew school Monday and Wednesday afternoons, the Jewish cub-scout troop Tuesday evening, Junior Congregation *shabbes* morning. When I was fourteen, I began spending summers at Camp Kadimah in Nova Scotia, universally described by its alumnae as the most spirited and socially cohesive summer camp imaginable—a veritable *shtetl* on Lake William.³ In short, I was part of a vibrant Jewish community, however minute.

The quality of my Jewish education was another matter; on the plane to complete my undergraduate degree at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem I had to brush up on the aleph-bet. I was at least blessed with immigrant parents who made Yiddish my mother tongue.⁴

During my first four decades as an academic my research projects on Jewish themes dealt with Russian-Jewish revolutionaries in the 1890s, the Soviet-Jewish emigration movement in the 1980s, the Jewish communities of Moscow, Kiev and Minsk in the 1990s, and the second *intifada* in the 2000s.⁵ By any reasonable standard, my contribution to *Canadian Jewish Studies*—a few brief journal articles and a co-edited book of mainly previously published articles—was thin and undistinguished.

Thus, I may be accurately categorized as a dilettante or a Johnny-come-lately to the field of Canadian Jewish Studies but not as one of Amir's academic pioneers. I think my main claim to "fame" as a student of Canadian Jewish Studies is that I was one of the principal investigators of the 2018 Survey of Jews in Canada, the first such survey based on a nearly nationwide representative sample.

This "first" is a sad comment on the study of Canadian Jewry by means of survey research. I don't hold Canadian Jewry to the standard of the American behemoth, which has produced hundreds of community and national surveys dating as far back as 1938.⁶ Apart from enriching our knowledge, this effort has enabled organizations to maximize the welfare of American Jewry by using hard sociological and demographic data to help formulate plans and policies. I may more fairly compare us to the Jewish community of the UK. Although just three-quarters the size of Canadian Jewry, it boasts the Institute for Jewish Policy Research. With an annual budget of millions of pounds sterling, it conducts frequent sociological and demographic surveys of the highest quality covering the UK and continental Europe.⁷ Even the Australian Jewish community, about 30 percent the size of its Canadian counterpart, does a better job than us, mainly because of survey research coming out of the Australian Centre for Jewish Civilisation at Monash University in Melbourne.⁸ Significantly, most Jewish survey research in these other English-majority democracies seems to be routinely funded by Jewish organizations and philanthropists. While the contribution of Canadian Jewish organizations to the 2018 Survey of Jews in Canada was certainly much appreciated, it amounted to less than one-half the cost of a one-off project.

I hope the publications that have already come out of the 2018 Survey of Jews in Canada and the work that will be based on the survey results in the next few years⁹ will allow the younger and emerging generation of scholars in the field of Canadian Jewish Studies to understand how much survey research can contribute to general knowledge and policy-making. If they are inspired to join the dance, they too will have the opportunity to become pioneers.

1
Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1965).

2
Amir Lavie, "Introduction," *Canadian Jewish Studies/Études juives canadiennes* (30, 2: 2020), p. 72.

3
"Bobby Brym," *Camp Kadimah: The Story of Our Lives*, a documentary film produced and

directed by Linda Medjuck Suissa, <https://www.thekadimahmovie.com/bobby-brym/>.

4
Robert Brym, "How high school drama helped me to become a sociologist: an essay in the sociology of autobiography," *Canadian Journal of Sociology* (31, 2: 2006), pp. 245-57.

5
Robert Brym, "Marginality, structure, agency: a slow learner confronts sociology," in

Stephen Riggins and Neil McLaughlin, eds.
Canadian Sociologists in the First Person
(Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press,
2021), pp. 33-48.

6

The Berman Jewish Databank, <https://bit.ly/2VlOng6>. I do not minimize the significance of Louis Rosenberg's and Charles Shaha's work on Canadian censuses. However, census-based demographics tell us little about behaviour and nothing about attitudes, beliefs and values. Moreover, the Canadian census has become a less reliable source of basic demographic information on Canadian Jews over the past decade because it was a voluntary survey in 2011 and in 2016 and 2021 the wording of the ethnicity question was changed in a way that underestimated the number of Jews in the country. See Trevor Smith and Scott McLeish, "Technical report on changes in response related to the census ethnic origin question: focus on Jewish origins, 2016 census integrated with 2011 National Household Survey," <https://bit.ly/2ZEhbGg>.

7

Institute for Jewish Policy Research, <https://bit.ly/3qk7gZ5>.

8

Australian Centre for Jewish Civilisation,
<https://bit.ly/2Vm66Ok>.

9

Robert Brym, Keith Neuman and Rhonda Lenton, *2018 Survey of Jews in Canada* (Toronto: Environics Institute), <https://bit.ly/3lsulos>; Robert Brym, Anna Slavina and Rhonda Lenton, "Qualifying the leading theory of diaspora Jewry: an examination of Jews from the former Soviet Union in Canada and the United States," *Contemporary Jewry* (40, 2: 2020), <https://bit.ly/36rfJl3>; Robert Brym and Rhonda Lenton, "Jewish religious intermarriage in Canada," *Canadian Jewish Studies/ Études Juives Canadiennes* (30, 2: 2020) pp. 67-82 <https://bit.ly/3fRRyZu>; Robert Brym and Rhonda Lenton, "Antisemitism, anti-Israelism and Canada in context," in Robert Kenedy, Uzi Rebhun and Carl Ehrlich, eds. *Israel and the Diaspora: Jewish Connectivity in a Changing World* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2022), pp. 171-82; Robert Brym and Randal Schnoor, eds. *The Ever-Dying People? Canada's Jews in Comparative Perspective* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, forthcoming 2022).